

PART TWO:
THE PHILOSOPHICAL
REHABILITATION OF TRADITION

INTRODUCTION TO PART TWO

Gadamer recalls, in the concluding essay of his book Hegel's Dialectic, that Heidegger – even as a young teacher – used to say that Hegel was the most radical of the Greeks. In this remark we find the unity of the following treatment of the philosophical rehabilitation of tradition. Our discussion of this subject focuses on three figures, Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, for each of whom the thought of Greek antiquity is of fundamental importance.

The title of this section, "The Philosophical Rehabilitation of Tradition," stems from that most suggestive portion of Gadamer's Truth and Method on the rehabilitation of authority and tradition. Tradition needed to be rehabilitated, that is, once again made fit for serious consideration, after the decline of tradition suffered in the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment. The rise, during those periods, of aesthetic consciousness and romantic hermeneutics can be subsumed under the general problem of historical consciousness. This consciousness poses the problem of alienation between the past and the present. Aesthetic consciousness solved the problem, after a fashion, by regarding manifestations of past life as objects of beauty. Romantic hermeneutics aided the solution by suggesting that the scholar's task is a sensitive re-creation of the psychology of the ancient author. But such a solution puts aside the question of the truth of the ancient artifact, for such an object is all-too-plainly fettered by the dogmatic ideas of its age. The setting-aside of the question of truth exposes the inadequacy of the solution. A reconciliation between past and present which regards the past only as a source of beauty, divorced from truth, is an imperfect reconciliation at best. This Gadamer has argued, and in the first section of this dissertation we have suggested the consequences of Gadamer's argument for tradition in general. Let us now briefly sketch the argument of the present, second section.

Hegel, we shall see, was the first to show the way out of the impasse of historical consciousness. His development of the Platonic dialectic revealed that the alienation between past and present, as a particular case of the more general alienation between the self and the other, need never be final. In dialectic, what seems wholly other is taken up in thought and shown to be the defining factor of one's own position. Hegel applied this insight to the histories of art and of philosophy, seeing in them the progression of the human spirit. Hence no movement can be discarded, even the most contradictory, for all contribute to the dialectical development of all. Such an all-encompassing dialectic might seem to threaten the dissolution of thought into an endlessly reflective and indiscriminate scepticism. How, it might be asked, can one believe in anything, given Hegel's dialectical demand that every claim to truth confront itself with its opposite? The answer to this lies in the Hegelian premise that being corresponds to thought. What is and has been, even what is contradictory, can be understood. This marks an important point in the rehabilitation of tradition, a point which we shall examine in chapter IV. It suggests the intelligibility of all being, past as well as present.

The logical consequence of Hegel's premise is the doctrine of absolute knowledge. According to this doctrine, knowledge is absolute in that it absolves (or dissolves) the opposition between the knower and the known. Such a doctrine contains the abiding truth of reflective thought, which overcomes all differences or contradictions by grasping them as part of the movement of a unified reality. But it also raises the specter of an arrogant knowledge which believes itself to have achieved, once and for

all, an absolute position. From this position it can then dispense with the need for further knowledge or experience. Gadamer, invoking Heidegger, has criticized Hegel on precisely this point. Heidegger's characterization of Hegel as the beginning of the culmination of metaphysical thought focuses on Hegel's understanding of consciousness and of time. According to Heidegger, the Hegelian consciousness fails to heed what underlies it, and the Hegelian understanding of time neglects the hidden effectiveness of history, which cannot be reduced to a historiographic formula. Hegel's thought too clearly bears the traces of the Greek philosophy with which the forgetfulness of being first began. Nevertheless, Hegel and Heidegger should be regarded, according to Gadamer, as pursuing a common project. This is the project of overcoming the historical consciousness which resulted in historicism by means of another consciousness, a historical self-consciousness. Such a self-consciousness, which shall be explored in chapter V, regards the self within the inexorable movement of history as rational spirit and as fate.

The fate of which Heidegger speaks, the growing forgetfulness of being which began its culmination in Hegel, is an ambiguous thing. One cannot escape one's fate, and Heidegger is aware that, in his own discussion of the meaning of being, he cannot avoid treating it as one among other beings. This takes place whenever being, as a noun, is yoked to a predicate, thus becoming the subject of a sentence. At the same time, however, Heidegger struggles to overcome this fate. His well-known destruction of the history of ontology is precisely such a struggle. It strives to bring to conscious reflection the largely unconscious assumptions about being which have prevailed throughout philosophic history. But as Heidegger has himself noted, such a destruction is, from another point of view, a kind of appropriation of the tradition. It appropriates the history of ontology so as to bring out its concealed presuppositions. In this sense the Heideggerian destruction contributes, as chapter VI shall make clear, to the rehabilitation of tradition. Tradition marks the progress in history of the fate of being.

The nurture of tradition, to which Gadamer has dedicated his efforts, can mean, broadly speaking, two things. On the one hand, it is the transformation of tradition, for cultural tradition survives only by changing. Scholars bring tradition up to date by comparing it with present life, applying it to current problems, and even by criticizing it in the name of a superior modern knowledge. Gadamer's emphasis on the fluidity of tradition, i.e., on how it means different things at different times, has won him allies and opponents. His allies applaud hermeneutics for showing the creative nature of interpretation. His opponents damn hermeneutics for delivering interpretation over to the caprice of critical ingenuity. Both camps are fixed on the idea of the nurture of tradition as that which transforms what is passed on. But the nurture of tradition also implies, on the other hand, an acknowledgment of the authority of tradition. Such an acknowledgment threatens those thinkers, stamped by the Enlightenment, who perceive in all authority a threat to the rationality embodied in the autonomous individual. Gadamer submits the equation between rationality and the autonomous individual to a question: can rationality be the possession of an individual who has been, so to speak, thrown into history? If it can not (and so Gadamer believes), then the nurture of tradition must be in some sense an acknowledgement of its authority, that is, of the way in which it has served as the author of what we are and will be. Chapter VII will show how this works in the investigation of the transmission or effective history of reason and its application.

The rehabilitation of tradition, in sum, arises in the recognition of the dialectical unity of past and present (Hegel), in the inevitable appropriation of that which we most criticize (Heidegger), and in the acknowledgment that the history we study has shaped our study and our selves as well (Gadamer). The reflectivity of thought, apparent in each of our three major figures, tempers the rehabilitative effort with the character of German idealism. In the reciprocal movement of ideas, history encompasses consciousness and consciousness encompasses history. Tradition is grasped in thought and thought is shaped by history. None can escape the temporal situation in which they find themselves, and yet all are invited to appropriate that situation as their own. The heritage of idealism, to which Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer are heirs, extends back to the Greeks, above all to Plato. Suitably qualified, it is compatible with the theology of tradition. Indeed, one could say that the fate of which Heidegger speaks, the fate of Western thought, is more deeply entangled with the consequences of the Incarnation than with any other event. But the philosophic rehabilitation of tradition is not a rehabilitation of Christian tradition, except insofar as Christian tradition is part of tradition in general. The philosophy of tradition can only be a handmaid of theology. The unity and difference between the two must remain, throughout this section, an open question.